

# Recognizing a Victim

What does a drowning person look like? The picture just formed in your mind is probably right, but it is also incomplete.

The first step in a rescue is recognizing that someone needs help. Often it is obvious. A capsized canoeist may be frantically swimming for shore while being swept toward rapids. People clinging to the top of a car swept off a low-water crossing may



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be shouting for help. Bystanders may be calling to someone floating facedown. But not all drowning situations are that dramatic or easy to spot. A child who appears to be playing may actually be in serious trouble. **It is important to know that not everyone in trouble will call for help or seem to be struggling.**

People in danger of drowning can be divided into categories based on their conditions. In turn, those conditions influence basic rescue techniques. Different classification schemes are possible, including *distressed* versus *drowning*, *conscious* versus *unconscious*, *active* versus *passive*. The labels are less important than identifying specific behaviors and their effects on rescue techniques. Several categories are discussed below, and you should learn the major differences. Note that these are guidelines, not absolutes. An actual victim may not exactly fit the descriptions and may slide from one type into another during the course of a rescue.

## Tired Swimmer

A tired swimmer may ask for help. He might be swimming in short bursts without making progress, going slowly with a weak stroke, clinging to a boundary line, or trying to float on his back. He lacks, or thinks he lacks, the energy to make it to shore and simply needs encouragement and a helping hand. The tired swimmer calm, will reply to questions, and should cooperate with the assist. Because the tired swimmer is not at immediate risk of submersion, the rescuer may proceed slowly and deliberately.

## Distressed Swimmer

A swimmer in distress shows various degrees of anxiety or panic. Often he is a poor swimmer who has gone beyond his abilities. He is no longer making progress but is still able to struggle enough to keep his head out of the water. He may call or wave for help. If he could level off and apply the same energy to his swimming, he might be able to reach safety on his own. He may act on clear instructions from a rescuer and reach for an aid as it is presented. Nonbuoyant rescue aids, such as a shirt or rope, can probably be used. Once help has come, the distressed swimmer may grow calm and even assist by assuming a prone position and kicking.

The rescuer should remain alert and wary, however, for it may take a long time for the victim to return to a normal state of mind and behavior. The rescuer should avoid contact. The longer a distressed swimmer remains in trouble, the more likely he is to show the symptoms of an actively drowning victim. The timing of the rescue is therefore important, but the rescuer may have several minutes in which to plan and give assistance.

## Actively Drowning Victim

An actively drowning victim is at a stage just before submersion and unconsciousness. He can't stay at the surface and will generally go under in less than a minute. He is unable to call or wave for help and must be recognized by his facial expression and inadequate movement. He is usually vertical in the water and may have his head thrown back with face upward. Arms are extended to the side, pressing down or flapping. There is no effective leg movement. His head may bob below the surface. Although conscious, he probably cannot respond to commands or reach for nearby rescue aids. During the assist, he may try to stay vertical and resist horizontal tows. The rescuer should avoid contact. Buoyant aids are needed for support.

Unaided, a poor swimmer in distress may slip into the actively drowning stage. Other victims may immediately show such behavior. This is particularly true of nonswimmers; who have never supported themselves in deep water. A nonswimmer stepping off a submerged ledge will be unable to move a few feet to shallow water. A young nonswimmer knocked off an air mattress won't be able to reach for it and may submerge in only 20 seconds. Speedy rescue is essential.

## Unconscious Victim

Various circumstances can cause people to lose consciousness in the water. Unaided, the actively drowning victim will soon lose consciousness and become passive. Immersion in cold water can numb a swimmer, eventually causing unconsciousness even if the person is wearing a flotation device. Other swimmers may black out with little or no warning because of a diving injury, hyperventilation, heart attack, stroke, seizure, drunkenness, or drug reaction.

An unconscious victim may float facedown at the surface or, more often, part or all of the way to the bottom. Speed in rescue is extremely important. Breathing will stop and must be started again as soon as possible if the victim is to survive. Because an unconscious victim cannot grasp a rescue aid, a rescuer must make physical contact. In every instance, a person who has lost consciousness in the water will need medical evaluation. If you are in a public setting, make sure that someone has summoned emergency medical services (EMS), even if all you do immediately is to shout for someone to call 911 as you move to get the person out of the water.

## Injured Victim

A water rescue can become even more complex if the victim is injured. Diving into shallow water or being hit by a surfboard can cause head and spinal injuries. Cuts and broken bones can happen from boat collisions, water-skiers hitting objects, entering the water, boats capsizing in rapids, or surf casting swimmers against pilings. Gasoline explosions on motorboats can cause burns. Fishermen might become entangled in hooks. Some marine creatures can inflict painful stings.

In all such situations, general first aid rules apply: *Treat the most serious condition first, do no further harm, and quickly summon advanced help if needed.* In water rescues, the most serious condition is likely to be stopped breathing. But standard rescue techniques for a person who is not breathing can greatly worsen a spinal injury. These concerns will be covered in a later section.

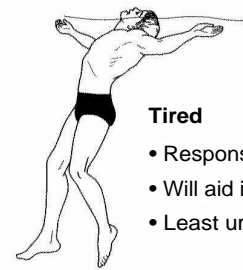
## Endangered Swimmer

The above classifications are based on either a lack or a loss of swimming ability on the victim's part. One more category is needed to cover situations when a **competent** swimmer faces problems that could push him into one of the other groups. A capsized canoeist caught in a cold, fast current is one such situation; a kayaker pinned against a rock is another. Ocean rip currents can sweep a swimmer out to sea. Fast-rising tides against a cliff face can catch a hiker off guard. Abnormally high waves can sweep fishermen off jetties. Flash floods can trap motorists in their cars.

Because the situations vary greatly, so will rescue responses. In some cases, the victim can make it to shore unaided and the rescuer's job becomes one of follow-up support, first aid, and transportation. In others, a rescuer can help from shore. In still others, the only safe option left to a lifesaver is to immediately seek aid from a trained rescue squad with special gear. Going for help is as much a lifesaving technique as any other. Success is the final measure of any rescue. If you can't safely perform a rescue with the resources at hand, then aid the victim by quickly seeking help from someone with more training and better equipment.

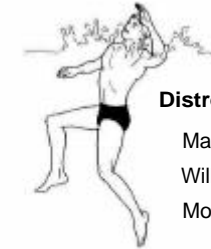
## VICTIM CHARACTERISTICS

Rescue urgency and response depend on the victim's condition.



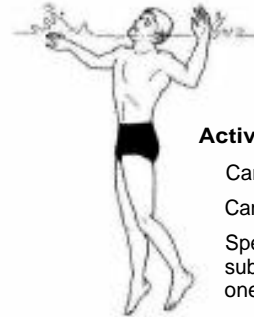
### Tired

- Responsive
- Will aid in rescue
- Least urgent



### Distressed

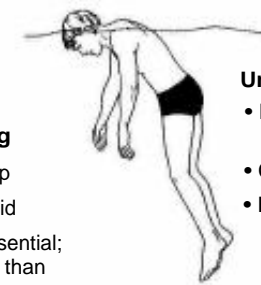
- May call for help
- Will reach for aid
- More urgent



### Actively Drowning

- Cannot call for help
- Cannot reach for aid

Speedy rescue essential; submerges in less than one minute



### Unconscious

- Probably not breathing
- Contact required
- Extremely urgent



- Various degrees of response and urgency
- A special consideration is to avoid aggravating injury



### Endangered

- Each situation unique
- Safety of rescue effort is a primary concern